



## Cultural security: evaluating the power of culture in international affairs

Victor P. Madeira

**To cite this article:** Victor P. Madeira (2015): Cultural security: evaluating the power of culture in international affairs, *Intelligence and National Security*, DOI: [10.1080/02684527.2015.1077626](https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2015.1077626)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2015.1077626>



Published online: 01 Sep 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 55



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**Cultural security: evaluating the power of culture in international affairs** in *Insurgency & Terrorism Series*, edited by Rohan Gunaratna, London, Imperial College Press, 2015, xxii+289 pp., £65/US\$110 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-78326-548-0

This work could not be timelier. One aim of the genocidal attacks on other religions and their cultural heritage by *Daesh* (the self-styled 'Islamic State') is to draw Western and other powers into an apocalyptic clash of civilisations. But even though the author does not touch on *Daesh*, he does highlight its predecessors' 'cultural cleansing' campaigns (p.22) in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. Yet the mundane and gory reality of life in such groups is a world away from the slick propaganda they peddle. And the reality is that they are little more than armed murderers, vandals and thieves.

This last point – the theft, smuggling and sale of cultural/religious artefacts to fund armed conflict – is the focus of Erik Nemeth's *Cultural Security*. Yet his research looks also to explore the broader ties between 'culture' and 'national security', highlighting the vital importance of understanding perceptions and belief systems, for instance.

*Cultural Security* consists of three sections. The first one examines 'evolving threats to the security of cultural property', while the second 'considers the interplay of the art market and cultural property' and the third 'explores the emerging political clout of cultural property' (pp.xx–xxi).

Section 1 consists of three chapters. The first one considers the growing role of art as a factor in international security – particularly the shift from being the object of wartime destruction to becoming an instrument of political violence. In chapter 2, Nemeth focuses on the State's role as both plunderer and protector of cultural property, which in his view has become a currency of restitution in international affairs. The third and final chapter of this section concentrates on conflict art and its strategic potential as an element of 'security'.

The second section of the book contains three chapters. In chapter 4, the author examines the growing availability of open-source (i.e. unclassified) material to those interested in collecting cultural intelligence. This, he believes, has enabled many States to develop a pre-emptive strategy to ensure cultural security. The fifth chapter assesses the role of international art sales as sources of cultural intelligence, thereby allowing market and supplier nations alike to understand (and therefore exploit) 'art intelligence' better. And finally, in chapter 6, Nemeth explores the strategic value of African tribal art, using this case-study to expand on the potential uses of 'art intelligence'.

The third and final section of *Cultural Security* also consists of three chapters. In his seventh chapter, the author looks at examples of wartime art crime and possible ways of tackling it. Chapter 8 assesses various art intelligence efforts and how clandestine art markets may help to turn ethical challenges like wartime art/cultural crime into avenues for diplomacy. And finally, in chapter 9, Nemeth explores the interplay between cultural property and foreign policy. He concludes his book by examining the political economy of cultural property, outlining his vision of culture as an alternative form of power.

With a first degree in Computer Science, Nemeth worked as a software developer for 10 years. At that stage, he undertook graduate work in neuroscience and retinal physiology, culminating in a PhD in Vision Science. Readers outside the social/political sciences may at times find *Cultural Security* challenging: repetition, densely-written passages and paragraph-long legends for figures that could themselves do with being full-page. Jumping from the historical to the contemporary and then back to the historical, some chapters read like what they originally were: articles on closely-related but still different topics.

This last point is one downside of an otherwise welcome and thought-provoking book: all its chapters (even the Conclusion) seem to have been previously published, at times giving Nemeth's writing a disjointed and repetitive feel. For instance, in the first two chapters he provides a helpful legal-historical overview of State and non-State plundering and looting, including the Nazi German and Soviet cases. But Nemeth then returns to these case-studies throughout the rest of the book, often discussing them as if for the first time again.

In the Soviet case, he curiously refers to the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) and the Ministry of State Security (MGB) as the two agencies during the Second World War that gathered intelligence on, located and subsequently managed the transport of looted artefacts (p.57). But the MGB was not created until March 1946, as part of one of several reorganisations that Soviet security organs faced in their history.

Nemeth also refers to General Ivan A. Serov – a future head of both the Committee of State Security (KGB) and the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) of the General Staff – as being in charge of the NKVD in post-war occupied Germany (p.245). But from April 1943 to March 1946 the organisation was called the People's Commissariat of State Security (NKGB) and then the MGB until 1953/4, depending on how one looks at it. These are relatively minor points, of course, but worth keeping in mind to avoid confusion.

This book's key contribution is in codifying the role that culture, heritage and mind-sets increasingly play in national security. For instance, the information war that Russia has waged against Ukraine since the 1990s hinges on precisely such elements. And their manipulation is what enabled the virtually bloodless but illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. Moscow's campaign was but a modern application of an ancient Eastern truth: the human mind has long been and remains *the* decisive battleground.

Western powers lag far behind their Eastern rivals in recognising the true nature of the changing character of conflict. With it shifting rapidly from the physical domain to the psychological – a process made easier by various technologies – we need to understand the full range of potential tools that can be deployed. Culture is a pivotal one and Erik Nemeth's book, despite some blemishes, is a much-needed first step on that long road ahead.

Victor P. Madeira

*Department of Economics and International Studies,  
The University of Buckingham, Buckingham, UK*

 [victor.madeira@buckingham.ac.uk](mailto:victor.madeira@buckingham.ac.uk)

© 2015 Victor P. Madeira

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2015.1077626>